

JOHN OSTLUND: Fresno excels at many things

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It's a miracle.

The U.S. Census Bureau recently announced that Fresno passed Long Beach to become the fifth largest city in California. But this isn't the miracle. The big story is not that 200 people move to Fresno every week, but rather how Fresno copes with this record-setting growth on a budget one-third the size of the city we just blew by.

As hard as this is to believe, it's true. For every dollar Fresno has to build roads, fight crime, provide water and garbage, keep our city clean and green, Long Beach has \$3. Imagine what our city could do with another billion or two.

Every day, City Hall pours five quarts of priorities into a one-gallon jug -- the mess left behind is what we all complain about. But it's what is accomplished with our modest budget that is worthy of recognition.

For example: The California Integrated Waste Management Board ranks Fresno No. 1 in the state for diverting 71% of our solid waste away from landfills. Which is to say that Fresno does a better job of recycling than any other California city, including those with much more money.

And consider the solar energy farm at Fresno Yosemite International Airport. This project is the largest of its kind in the country and will save our community \$13 million over the next 25 years. The bonus of this innovative idea is that through a long-term Power Purchase Agreement, it didn't cost the city a nickel to build.

Operating on just 30 cents for every dollar that the next largest California city has, Fresno has also managed to buy one of the largest fleets of clean-air vehicles in the state. And by December, every city garbage truck in Fresno will be clean-air certified.

Fresno is one of the safest cities in the state as well, recently achieving a 43-year low in crimes committed per capita. Compare that with Oakland, which had three times as many murders as Fresno despite 75,000 fewer residents.

Of course, Fresno's limited budget is not by design. Our above-average unemployment and below-average income, combined with dozens of social and economic issues are directly reflected in our paltry budget (if you can call a billion dollars paltry). But whoever said you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip never shopped in the vegetable section called Fresno.

It's interesting to note that those cities throughout the state that operate on two or three times as much money per person as Fresno, have many of the same problems we do. In fact, every city I looked at suffers from not being able to live within its means.

You'd think that Fresno's efficiency would count for something as the state looks to local communities to balance its budget. But that is an issue for another day.

To be clear, Fresno City Hall was asleep at the switch for 30 years when it came to downtown revitalization and controlling development. Our graffiti and weed abatement issues are still out of control, and you can't buy a parking permit online.

While no one at the city is claiming victory over every issue -- I do think it is time to give a little credit to where credit is due.

As a city, we're not perfect. We're simply better at doing more with less than other cities in the most populated state in the country.

So, the next time someone asks where you're from, put your hometown pride on display and tell them, "Fresno, the fifth largest and one of the best-run major cities in California."

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